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KLATZKIN'S HERMANN COHEN¹

THIS is a very well written book, written with the heart—a sad heart—and not merely with the head, by an able pupil about his distinguished and personally beloved teacher. The sadness of heart is due not merely to the fact that the distinguished and beloved master was dead—had recently died, but much more so—so it appears to the reader and is not concealed by the writer—to the fact that the work of the master represented to the mind of the pupil the irony and the tragedy of Jewish life in the lands of their dispersion. The author of the little book cannot help feeling that Hermann Cohen was a great intellect gone astray, that he expended his wonderful powers in a cause which is a mistake and which is fast becoming ancient history.

To be more explicit, Klatzkin is a Zionist: Cohen was opposed to Zionism. He was a Jew of the Reform wing, and was one of the most distinguished philosophers of Germany. He was professor at the University of Marburg, was a follower of Kant, whose ideas he expounded. But he was not a mere exponent of the philosopher of Königsberg, he was the founder of a system of his own based upon Kant, which attracted disciples, and he thus became the head of the so-called Neo-Kantian school of Marburg. The work that he did as a philosopher pure and simple was creditable to him as an individual, and to the Jews of whom he was a distinguished and faithful son. But Cohen did more than philosophize in the abstract, he made his Judaism tell in his philosophy. He was aggressively Jewish in his thinking. Great admirer as he was of the Greeks and their contributions to logic and science and ethics and

¹ *Hermann Cohen*, von JACOB KLATZKIN, Berlin; mit einem Bildniss nach einer Radierung von HERMANN STRUCK. JÜDISCHER VERLAG, 1919, pp. 100.

philosophy, he pointed out that no philosophical and ethical system is true that does not place at its centre the idea of ethical monotheism, which is the essence of Judaism. The God-idea in Judaism, he insists again and again, is not to be taken in the sense of a being existing in nature, whose attributes can be discovered by metaphysical and scientific inquiry, but that the Jewish God is the impersonation of the ethical idea. This distinguishes Judaism from all mythical religions as he calls them, in which God is regarded as a natural cause of the physical universe. With this conception of Judaism he united the notion that that is the important possession of the Jews, that it is their mission to preach that notion to the world, and it would be untrue to their destiny to endeavour to become a political entity and return to Palestine and form a State there.

This turn of Cohen's thought his biographer sincerely and sorrowfully regrets as being a great error, which is wholly explicable as the philosophy of the Reform movement of Judaism to which Cohen was presented as an offering by the 'Zeitgeist'. Klatzkin laments that so mistaken a movement should have won for its cause so great a man, for Reform is to him a lost cause, and he deplores the fact that his great teacher should have chosen to connect his name indissolubly with it.

All loyal Zionists will no doubt share Klatzkin's view, but to the impartial student it is anything but a matter for regret that an important Jewish movement which is here to stay shall have found so great a philosophical exponent. May orthodoxy and Zionism have equally good fortune.

The philosophical greatness of Hermann Cohen is beyond question, though the present writer must confess that he has found Cohen practically unreadable. So much the worse, no doubt, for the present writer. But Klatzkin's book is not concerned primarily with Cohen's philosophy generally, but with Cohen as a Jewish philosopher, and here the present writer, though for different reasons, agrees with Klatzkin in owning to a considerable measure of dissatisfaction. For reasons of his own, which cannot be discussed here, he doubts very much the

accuracy of Cohen's interpretations of Judaism or of the Jewish thinkers of the Middle Ages. To cite one instance, Cohen's motivation of the negative doctrine of attributes of the mediaeval Jewish philosophers as being due to the ethical essence of Judaism and its ethical conception of God appears to the present writer as a misreading or ignoring of the history of philosophy and of the historical influences under which the mediaeval Jewish thinkers stood. This is not, however, the place to expatiate upon the matter.

But if it is true that the impartial student will not begrudge the Reform movement so distinguished an exponent as Hermann Cohen, he will share all the dissatisfaction and perhaps astonishment and disillusion of Klatzkin when he learns from the latter that during the war Cohen actually wrote a book, *Deutschum und Judentum*, in which he defended the thesis that Judaism and Germanism have a common philosophy of life and, *mirabile dictu!* that all Jews in all lands should look to Germany as the mother of their soul! One is apt to lose faith in philosophy as a science when one sees how it is being used to defend the interest of the hour. It is no doubt one of the aberrations due to the war, which their authors will be glad to forget, but it is not flattering to the human mind as a source of unbiased truth. In view of Cohen's doubtful interpretations of Jewish thought in times of peace, there is perhaps less wonder that under stress of war his subjectivism should have gone to the limit of the absurd. And it is with deep concern and sincere reluctance that his faithful disciple takes him mercilessly to task for this last perpetration which contradicts, as Klatzkin shows, every statement on the question expressed by Cohen in his systematic works which are supposed to represent the mature convictions attained in a life of intense intellectual activity.

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